

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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DOWN TO EARTH

A Plea for Soil Conservation and Stewardship

By Walter C. Lowdermilk*

For more than twenty-five years my profession has been to read the records which peoples and nations as well as civilizations have written in the land. An observation of the land, or rather what remains of it, is often one of our best keys to the understanding of civilization that have gone before. My chief interest in these studies of land is to find the basis for a more lasting adjustment of people to the earth which God has provided.

For seventy centuries man has sought a more abundant life on this planet, but often with more of failure than of success for many. War, overgrazing, improper tillage and erosion have left their scars. It is not my purpose here to discuss the motives of good and evil that may inspire man's actions, but, rather to bring our thinking down to earth.

*The observance of "Refugee Year" gives special significance to this statement printed exactly ten years ago in the Sierra Leon Outlook. Estimates by the United Nations Organization tell us that at least 130,000,000 people have been driven from their homes and homelands since World War II. Today 2,000,000 or more are in refugee camps, waiting a chance to begin life over again somewhere, or to die. Other millions live, sleep and die on the streets of large Asian cities.

We do not suggest that the shortage of land alone is the cause of the refugee's plight, but the mounting shortage of crop land is a major factor adding the clouds of tragedy to our "brave new world."

Never before have we been so urgently challenged to face squarely the vital teachings about land and land's relation to God and to his neighbor in the use of it. We present this ten-year-old statement because of the savoring relevance. Ten years ago to many it seemed only pathetic, today we see much of its fulfillment before our eyes. May we as members of the Christian Rural Fellowship contribute all we can through prayer, study, and action.

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I. W. M.

My travels have taken me across six of the seven seas where I studied land and land use in twenty-nine different countries. I have also had a bird's eye view of eleven other countries during aerial flights to and from China and other sections of East Asia. Surveys of land use have taken me into those regions where civilization first arose as in the Near East and in the Far East.

What do we find? The cradles of civilization have been in decline. Ruins of great works bespeak former wealth and splendor amidst modern decadence and poverty. It is chiefly in the newer lands occupied in comparatively recent times that people enjoy a greater abundance of food and the necessities of life. This is an arresting tragedy. As I reflect on the poverty and distress of multitudes in the older land, I am deeply moved by the wastefulness and ineffable sadness of man's failure to adjust himself to the bounties God has provided.

In ignorance and waste man has strode across the face of the earth for seven thousand years reaping where he has not planted and destroying what he has not created. In occupying new lands, man tends to consume the topsoil and leave eroded plains and barren hillsides for the generations to come. In fact, man tends to destroy the source of his existence.

The use of livestock, tools and machines places us on trial. We can use these improvements either for achieving a higher degree of stewardship and cultivation, or we can use them in ignorance to our own destruction and those who follow. On the basis of past performance the task for the future is that mankind will mine out the earth's resources and productivity from place to place leaving desolation as of abandoned mines in our own West until the habitable parts of the earth are exploited and laid waste. Evidence of this may already be seen in our own country. For any further evidence we need only to turn to the great regions of the Middle East and great sections of Africa and realize the great difficulties that confront those peoples in rebuilding their standard of living with natural resources so tragically depleted.

If civilization is to endure we must be born again out of an economy of exploitation into an economy of conservation and stewardship. "Where there is no vision the people perish."

Though past failures are discouraging, there is yet hope and yet time as we appraise the possibilities of the earth in its stored resources and regenerative powers derived from the energy of the sun. If we find the facts and understand and make full use of the energies of the forces that are on every side we may still have an abundant life for all people.

I shall leave to others the discussion of the technical problems involved and confine myself to an examination of certain geophysical controls that condition any type of civilization whatever its motives. The law of gravitation is not subject to the

decree of any court, nor is the force of running water modified by popular vote. "They build the house in vain except the Lord build it," was said by a prophet long ago. We build a civilization in vain unless it is backed by laws of the universe and the laws of God.

After all, man is a newcomer and sojourner on the earth. The earth was already old in a display of manifold phenomena of terrestrial forces before the first hunter and the first farmer ever sought out food for his family and himself. The sea was filled with waters; rains descended and the foods came and went; continents were uplifted and worn away again and again by geologic erosions of streams and winds and the debris was sorted and spread out in great sedimentary deposits and compressed into rock strata. Countless volcanoes had burst forth in landscape where there was no man or sea to hear. Lava had poured forth in firey lakes without a human spectator. The sea advanced and withdrew. Vegetation in many forms spread over the land in mild and moist climates as fertile soils were formed. Beasts of the field, birds of the air, and fishes of the deep sea thrived and flourished. Some by failure of adjustment to their environment became extinct. Whether or how soon man may follow their course will depend to a large degree on how well we work out our relationship to each other and to God in use of resources provided for us.

The earth is the silent partner in the rise and fall of peoples. It richly rewards the diligent and the understanding. It brings poverty and decline upon those who neglect and waste its substance. The ancient law-giver said, "The sins of the father shall be visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation." But in the wastage of the earth's substance, the sins of exploitation and wastage are visited upon the children for ten times three and four generations to come.

In the last reckoning, all things are purchased with food. Such is the fateful and awful truth that hideous famines make known. People sell their liberty, their all for food when driven the extremes of this tragic choice. When food fails, all else fails. There is no substitute for food.

This partnership of land and the farmer is the rock foundation of our complex structure which provides high standards of living, culture and recreational activities. It is indeed well for us to realize, however, that "Man shall not live by bread alone." It was in Egypt, while contemplating the pyramids and long use of land in the Nile Valley, that I grasped more fully the basic relationships of civilization to the land. About six thousand years ago some genius of a farmer hitched an ox to the hoe and invented the plow and for the first time applied power to agriculture. This made the farmer more efficient in growing food. He could grow more than he needed for his family and so released

intermediate position. We may lose, through utterly destructive uses, the topsoil on a hillside, but the subsoil itself remains and if properly managed may be brought back to a measure of the original productivity of the topsoil. So we might say that soil should be considered in the category of trees and water, rather than as absolutely irreplaceable, as are minerals. As for the replaceable resources, we can never restore the vast original forests, but we can replace them with trees which at least approach the value of the original growth. Similarly, our supply of water is being constantly replenished as it falls from the skies each year. Irreplaceable resources such as minerals and oil, once used, are gone forever.

Water - Essential to Life

One of the ways in which we come into most intimate contact with our natural resources is in our water supply. We turn the faucet in order to secure a glass of water, without a thought as to its source. Little do we realize the various stages and steps through which that water has passed since it fell as raindrops on a field or wooded hillside. That which fell on open fields, as it ran down the slopes, picked up tiny particles which were carried some distance, possibly not coming to rest until it reached a city reservoir.

Waste is Sinful

But there are sins of omission as well as sins of commission. To use a Biblical quotation, "If any man knows what is right and fails to do it, it is sin." I don't think we would be stretching the interpretation of this statement too far if we say it applies to the use of our God-given resources.

When we consider that in many over-populated areas of the world today, millions of people go from infancy to old age without ever having been entirely free from the pangs of hunger, the sinful aspect of our misuse of our abundant natural resources becomes more apparent. This is especially true now when we know that proper use of our land means more efficient utilization, as well as the maintenance of a productive soil for future generations.

As we come more and more to recognize religion as providing a practical guide for our daily living, we cannot fail--it seems to me--to accept the implications of God's beneficent gifts to us as a Nation and as individuals.

Long ago the Psalmist said, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." We, too, lift up our eyes unto the hills of our country, we gaze upon its rolling and level fields, we view the bountiful supply of water flowing in our streams, we realize anew that the future strength of our country is dependent upon the manner in which we use these precious resources--the gift of an Omnipotent Creator--and we resolve to be good stewards of that which has been entrusted to our care.

some for his fellows and for other tasks. Greater farm efficiency led to divisions of labor that gave rise and time to a complex civilization of higher standards of living.

Maximum production is the goal. Land is the silent partner of tillers of the soil in this exacting and vital task, but the land may be damaged or destroyed by wasteful cultivation and misuse. We have examples of where new lands of America have been in the comparatively short time ruined for further cultivation for years to come. We have lost by erosion a section far greater than the state of Kansas.

The present National Soil Conservation Program, in which farmers of more than three-fourths of the total farm area have joined, has only made a beginning in this great task. This was the first time in history that our nation as a whole has taken serious thought and action to combat this evil of civilization that destroys productivity of lands as the need for them grows.

The world is today more fully occupied and populated by people than ever before. All lands have been possessed by the nations. No free land remains. Mankind is left to work out its own salvation upon the lands already occupied. This fact becomes even more sobering when we realize how rapidly population is increasing on the one hand and how eager people are to improve their level of living on the other. In the face of these facts all thoughtful people should be shocked into action as we realize that man is still destroying by neglect and wasteful methods the very basis of his life. If man is making deserts out of productive lands, it is a matter of not only national but world-wide concern. It becomes an international tragedy. If any nation would project itself into the future, it must protect its lands from the ravages of soil erosion and waste. When land is impoverished people lower their standards of living and suffer deprivations both physically and spiritually. Soil erosion is a deficiency disease of the land which begets a deficiency of food, vitality and higher values for peoples and nations.

Land, therefore, is not an economic commodity but an integral part of a nation even as its people are. Man expresses his moral obligation to posterity as surely through the earth as through his social institutions. Fertile or Sterile lands that are passed on to the future generations are, apart from blood descendants, our direct link to the future. When the earth's resources are wholly husbanded in the advanced knowledge of rural conservation, the possibilities of the earth for increased populations are beyond the imagination of mankind in general. If vast energies of the human race and resources of the earth could be directed toward a goal of conservation and stewardship instead of destruction and despoliation, the good earth would respond with abundance for all.

Only by conservation in the fullest sense of the basic resources of land, water and the spirit of people can maintain the human values of wholesome standards of living, opportunity, freedom, justice and faith in the destiny of mankind. Only in conservation have we the assurance of continued progress in the earth for that something which has led mankind forward and upward. Only by conservation can we be led to the higher economic, physical and spiritual development which expresses itself in stewardship of the earth for the well-being of the individual, the state and the survival of all.

Liberty Hyde Bailey has perhaps given us our best clue towards stewardship when he declared, "So bountiful have been the earth and so securely have we drawn from it our substance that we have taken it all for granted as if it were only a gift and with little care or conscience thought of the consequences of our use of it; nor have we very much considered the essential relationship that we bear to it as living parts of the vast creation." Our relation with the planet must be raised into the realm of spirit; we cannot be fully useful otherwise.

We come out of the earth and we have a right to the use of the materials; and there is no danger of class materialism if we recognize the original material as designed and if we understand our proper relation to the creation, for then will grow selfishness and the use of them be removed. This will mean a better conception of property and of man's obligation in the use of it. We shall conceive of the earth which is a common habitation as inviolable. One does not act rightly towards one's fellows if he does not know how to act rightly toward the earth.

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STEWARDSHIP OF NATURAL RESOURCES*

-- by T. S. Buie

The strength of a nation is dependent upon its God-given natural resources and the manner in which they are used by its people. No nation in the history of the world has assumed an important position of leadership except it had a productive soil, an abundant supply of water, and a climate which enabled these resources to be used to advantage by its people.

Replaceable and Irreplaceable Resources

We need to think of our natural resources in two categories: those which are replaceable, such as timber and water; and those which are irreplaceable, such as minerals. Soil occupies a somewhat

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*From an address made by T. S. Buie, State Conservationist, Soil Conservation Service, Columbia, S. C., at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Georgia. Used by kind permission.